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### The Doctors McKane

Evelyn W. Parker

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*The Doctors McKane*  
*Evelyn W. Parker*  
*Methods of Historical Research*  
*History 450*  
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It is a pleasure to introduce the Doctors McKane; Cornelius, and his wife Alice.

They came from less than ideal beginning circumstances and rose to meet and master challenge after challenge. Even the projects they themselves considered failures benefitted others.

Many of us hope to positively impact this world during our time here. The Doctors McKane met and mastered that challenge also.

The Doctors McKane emigrated to Savannah, Georgia separately from the north. They had dual motives for coming but the motives were common to both doctors. Their first motive was to practice medicine thereby relieving the physical suffering of the people of the African-American race. Their second motive was to uplift the spirits of the people of their race. Through the examples they set and the opportunities they provided they hoped to encourage individuals to strive to better themselves.

The Doctors McKane practiced medicine in Savannah in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>1</sup> At that time the ratio of African-American physicians to African-American people throughout the United States was 1/3, 194.<sup>2</sup> There was a definite need for their service as doctors.

The figures from the Negro Population Census showed that the educating of African-American youth was on the rise. Sixty-five percent of African-American youth ages six to fourteen were presently attending school. These were encouraging figures to those in favor of the race becoming self sufficient and improving its intellectual as well as economic status.<sup>3</sup>

Both of these young ambitious doctors had made impressive

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<sup>1</sup> Charles L. Hoskins. The Trouble They Seen: Profiles in the Life of Col. John H. Deveaux 1848-1909. (Sav., 1989) 52 - 57. By the author.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Negro Population in the United States. 1790-1915. ([Washington, D.C.] Bureau of the Census, 1918.) 517.

<sup>3</sup> Savannah Tribune (Savannah), 8 February 1896.

progress personally so they were excellent role models. The fact they had aspired to becoming physicians indicated they were not only confident but competent. They were successful at a time in the history of America when African-Americans were encouraging each other to excel.

Dr. Cornelius McKane was originally from British Guyana. He was born in February of 1862.<sup>4</sup> His grandmother who had been a slave in Dutch Guyana urged him to return to Africa where his great grandfather had been an African king. She wanted him to do something positive there for his race. He was sent to the United States at the age of ten and was himself encouraged and aided in pursuing an education in New York by Deacon Moses F. Webster. Dr. McKane went back to Liberia and taught school before returning to the United States to attend medical school.<sup>5</sup> He was credited with becoming a "scholar, linguist, orator, teacher, clergyman, author, editor and race champion."<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Alice Woodby McKane though a natural born citizen of the United States was no less challenged by her beginnings than her husband. Born in Bridgewater, Pennsylvania in 1865 she lost both parents by the time she was seven years old. She was then stricken

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<sup>4</sup> United States Department of Commerce. 1900 Census. (U.S. Government. 1900.).

<sup>5</sup> Hoskins, Trouble They Seen, 53.

<sup>6</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, ed., Notable Black American Women. Gayle Research (Detroit, 1993.) 706.

blind and remained blind for three years.<sup>7</sup> When she recovered her sight she was educated in the public schools of Bridgewater, then went on to Hampton Institute (1883-1886) and she attended the Institute for Colored Youth in Pennsylvania (1886-1889). Dr. Alice McKane then went on the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania where she graduated as a Medical Doctor in 1892.<sup>8</sup> She left Pennsylvania to go to Augusta, Georgia to practice medicine and teach "young women to care for the sick." Dr. Alice McKane also taught chemistry and physiology at the Lucy Laney Haines School in Augusta. Training young African-American women to become nurses was "of the greatest interest" to her.<sup>9</sup>

Dr. Cornelius McKane met Doctor Alice Woodby late in 1892 and the two were married in Chatham County, Georgia on February second 1893 by Rev. Alexander Ellis, a "minister of the Gospel."<sup>10</sup>

When Dr. Alice McKane told her husband of her mission to train African-American nurses he rapidly joined in her efforts. They began in their offices in Savannah in 1893 and established the first training school for nurses in the southeastern United States. The first graduating class of the nurses school was 1895. This is what the Savannah Morning News referred to as the "preliminary organization" for the betterment of health conditions of the

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Yenser, ed. Who's Who In Colored America. Thomas Yenser (Brooklyn, 1942). 347

<sup>8</sup> Smith. Notable Black American Women. 706.

<sup>9</sup> Smith. Notable Black American Women. 706.

<sup>10</sup> Probate Court of Chatham County, Georgia. Marriage License Book "J". 1893. 38

African-Americans in Savannah.<sup>11</sup> The institution was started in a two story wooden building at Montgomery and Liberty Streets in Savannah.<sup>12</sup>

Since the establishment of Liberia as an independent nation in 1847 (with financial backing from American charitable societies) full scale emigration to Liberia was encouraged in order to create a home for freed African-American slaves from America.<sup>13</sup>

Because of his African roots Dr. Cornelius McKane was compelled to become involved in the emigration and to offer what he could to his native continent. On May 17, 1895 the Doctors McKane left Savannah for Liberia.<sup>14</sup> The loss of the doctors to the city of Savannah was heralded in the Savannah Tribune that very week, "...the city has lost a substantial citizen and the race an advocate who has been ever true."<sup>15</sup>

Within six months of leaving Savannah Dr. Cornelius McKane was beginning to doubt the wisdom of his own move to Liberia. Dr. McKane expressed these doubts in a letter to the editor of the Savannah Tribune. His reasons for going were to establish a hospital and to once again serve as an educator. Dr. McKane saw the need for emigrants with agricultural skills and the need for

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<sup>11</sup> Savannah Morning News. (Savannah) 27 October 1963. Savannah Public Library Pamphlet Collection.

<sup>12</sup> Hoskins. Trouble They Seen. 54.

<sup>13</sup> World Book Encyclopedia. (Chicago, World Book Ind. 1980), "Liberia" by J. Gus Liebenow. 205.

<sup>14</sup> Hoskins. Trouble They Seen. 54.

<sup>15</sup> Savannah Tribune (Savannah) 18 May 1895.

massive numbers of American emigrants in order for the colonization process to work in Liberia. The disillusionment expressed in his letter is directed at broken promises of the various societies responsible for encouraging the emigration. The letter warns of hardships and encourages only pioneer types to take the chance but he still promotes the idea of large scale numbers of African-Americans to try to assist in colonizing Liberia. He does state in the letter the possibility that "...God will redeem Africa through her own aboriginal children."<sup>16</sup>

While in Liberia the Doctors McKane were able to establish and organize a Health Bureau, Private Hospital, and a Nurses Training School (all in Monrovia, the capitol of Liberia). It was reported by Who's Who in Colored America that Dr. Alice Woodby McKane contracted African Fever in 1896 which made it necessary for the McKanes to head back to the United States.<sup>17</sup>

One benefit the McKanes did reap while in Liberia was the birth of their first child, Alice Frances McKane. Unfortunately, this was a short lived joy as they lost her to enteritis (cholera or diphtheria)<sup>18</sup> one year later in Savannah. She died in Savannah

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<sup>16</sup> Savannah Tribune. (Savannah) 30 November 1896. Cornelius McKane author - "Letter from Africa".

<sup>17</sup> Joseph J. Boris, ed. Who's Who in Colored America. [1928-29]. Who's Who in Colored America Corp., New York, 1929, second edition. 250.

<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth J. Taylor, ed. Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary. 27th Ed. (W.B. Sanders Corp., Philadelphia, 1989) 559.



on August 14, 1896. Her father signed the death certificate.<sup>19</sup>

Dr. Alice Woodby McKane had made a favorable impression in Monrovia, not only as a medical professional but as a lecturer and a teacher. The Savannah Tribune printed a glowing tribute to her for a speech she had given on "Higher Education for Women" this was reprinted from the Morovian Newspaper.<sup>20</sup>

The next communication to the Tribune from Dr. Cornelius McKane was sent from Liverpool, England, January 5, 1896. The tone is one of bitter disappointment and resentment of unkept promises. Once again Dr. McKane points to the charitable immigration societies and their failed promises. This time he addresses them as "people who care more for gold than the perpetuation of the republic."<sup>21</sup>

The Doctors McKanes arrived back in Savannah Monday, the seventeenth of February, 1896. The Savannah Tribune joyously proclaims their return.<sup>22</sup> One week later the Tribune was defending Dr. Cornelius McKane against rumors and attacks from the societies he had criticized. The rumors charged that he left Liberia due to failed political aspirations.<sup>23</sup>

Back on United States soil the Doctors McKane again focus

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<sup>19</sup> Chatham County Bureau Vital Statistics. Death Records 1896. Vol. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Savannah Tribune. 11 January 1896.

<sup>21</sup> Savannah Tribune. 8 February 1896.

<sup>22</sup> Savannah Tribune. (Savannah) 22 February 1896.

<sup>23</sup> Savannah Tribune. (Savannah) 19 February 1896.

their energy on the betterment of their race in Georgia. Dr. W.C. Blackman had assumed their role at the nurses training school when they left for Liberia. The Doctors McKane petitioned the Superior Court of Chatham County for a charter for the McKane Hospital for Women and Children and Training School for Nurses. The charter was granted on the first day of June 1896.<sup>24</sup> The hospital and nurses school was now located at Florence and 36th Streets in Owens Ward in Savannah. The original building was a two story wooden structure.<sup>25</sup>

The McKane Hospital was considered vitally important to the African-Americans in Savannah for three reasons. This hospital would be run by African-Americans for the relief of the suffering of African-Americans and to provide respectable jobs for African-Americans.<sup>26</sup>

In the six months from the granting of the Charter and the opening of the doors on the hospital Dr. Cornelius McKane and Dr. Lloyd would become orators at area churches in the evenings. This was done to gain the financial support of the African-American citizens of Savannah. It was very important to the Doctors McKane that the colored people of Savannah support the hospital themselves. Dr. Alice Woodby McKane realized in April of 1898 that the reason the area colored people gave little support was because

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<sup>24</sup> Savannah Morning News. Hospital Collection Savannah Public Library. 1936.

<sup>25</sup> Chatham County Superior Court. W.P.A. Cadastral Survey. Owens Ward, Lots #88-90.

<sup>26</sup> Savannah Tribune. (Savannah) 24 October 1896.

of "ignorance and poverty."<sup>27</sup> Their hearts were right but the ability was lacking.

The residents of the Cuyler-Brownsville neighborhood in Savannah (where the hospital was located) have always been proud of their possession of that medical facility. In 1901 the name of the McKane Hospital for Women and Children and Training School for Nurses was changed to Charity Hospital. A new brick building was erected in 1931. The pride of the neighborhood centered on the fact the original creation was "founded, administered and staffed by blacks."<sup>28</sup>

The hospital served the black community until 1964. The Cuyler Community Improvement Association bought the property in 1983 to save it from demolition. In 1985 the Association was successful in having the building placed on the National Register of Historic Places. There is a move on currently to obtain funding for the building to be renovated.<sup>29</sup>

"The history of Charity Hospital represents both the constraints of a segregated society and the resourcefulness of Savannah's Black Community in meeting crucial health needs."<sup>30</sup>

In 1901 the hospital was still experiencing financial

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<sup>27</sup> Smith. Notable Black American Women. 706.

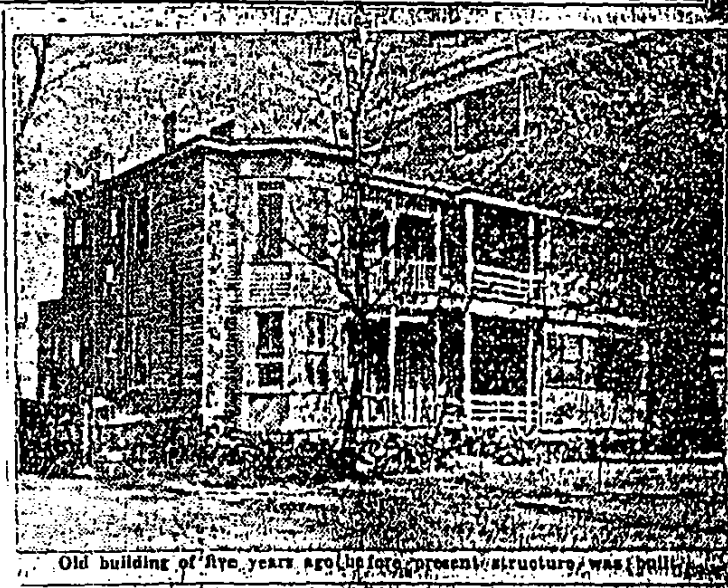
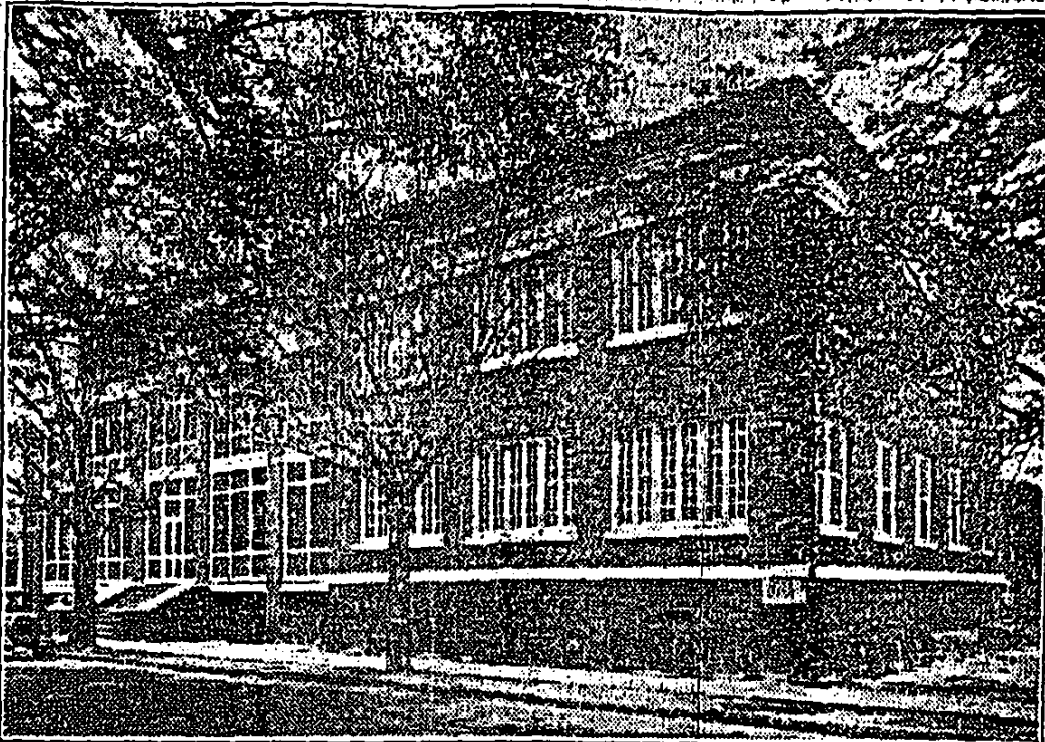
<sup>28</sup> Barbara A. Hendry. Insight. Pamphlet prepared as part of Cuyler-Brownsville Exhibit, Savannah Visitor Center. December 1993.

<sup>29</sup> Hendry. Insight. 1993.

<sup>30</sup> "Cuyler-Brownsville Exhibit.". Savannah Visitor Center. 1993. Savannah.

Apropos statement included in Exhibit worthy of inclusion.

## Charity Hospital's Modern Building



Old building of five years ago, before present structure was built.

### ORIGINALLY THE MCKANE HOSPITAL FOR WOMEN AND CHILDREN AND TRAINING SCHOOL FOR NURSES.

The hospital was founded in 1893 by Doctors Alice Woodby McKane and Cornelius McKane and started in their offices on Montgomery Street. The two story frame building was used in 1896 (lower). The name of the hospital was changed in 1901. The large brick building (Upper) was erected in 1931 and stands today at the corner of Florence Street and 36th. Street West.

problems. The hospital's Board of Trustees decided to approach the Savannah City Council for help in funding the work of the hospital. The Doctors McKane were very much against this. The petition of the Board of Trustees of the hospital was heard by the City Council of Savannah on the Twentieth of December 1901. This was immediately followed by a petition of protest to the same council filed by Doctors Cornelius and Alice McKane. The McKane's petition was filed against city support of the hospital.<sup>31</sup> The Savannah Tribune (longtime supporter and friend to the McKanes) published two consecutive articles (the next day) that were strongly critical of the "...nefarious actions of a few malcontents and their misguided followers." and that accused "...certain negroes of attempting to thwart the efforts of others."<sup>32</sup> The Doctors McKane had fallen from grace.

The Doctors McKane severed their relationship with Charity Hospital. They remained in their home on Augusta Avenue and continued to practice medicine in Savannah.<sup>33, 34</sup> They added more land to their farm property in 1905 for a combined total of approximately eleven acres.<sup>35</sup> In 1909 they left the area permanently to go to Boston, Massachusetts in order to provide

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<sup>31</sup> City Council of Savannah. Minutes. December 20, 1901. Vol. 1900-1902.

<sup>32</sup> Savannah Tribune. (Savannah), December 21, 1901.

<sup>33</sup> 1900 Census.

<sup>34</sup> Goette. City Directory. (Savannah 1901)

<sup>35</sup> Chatham County Deed Books 7W, 9A, 9C. 1785-1910

proper educations for their surviving children, [Cornelius Jr. (b. 1897)<sup>36</sup> and William Frances (b. 1902)<sup>37</sup>].

Within two weeks of the arrival of the McKane family in Boston both doctors took and passed the Massachusetts State Medical Boards and began practicing medicine there.<sup>38</sup> Three years later, in March 1912, at the age of fifty, Dr. Cornelius McKane died.<sup>39</sup>

Dr. Alice McKane chose to restrict herself to office practice and the study of women's diseases. The sixth day of March, 1948, Dr. Alice Woodby McKane succumbed to death from arteriosclerosis.<sup>40</sup> Her life was spent making contribution to the betterment of the African-American race and the worlds of church, medicine, politics, art, and poetry.<sup>41</sup>

Were the Doctors McKane ambitious or philanthropic in nature? Research suggests both. The evidence available suggests the ambitions of the Doctors Cornelius and Alice McKane were not just for themselves but for their entire race. All the contributions they made in their lives benefitted others; beginning with their medical practices to relieve the physical suffering of people of

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<sup>36</sup> 1900 Census

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Yenser, ed. Who's Who in Colored America 1941 to 1944. Yenser (New York 1942).

<sup>38</sup> Smith. Notable Black American Women. 706.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph Boris, ed. Who's Who in Colored America. Who's Who Corp. (New York 1927).

<sup>40</sup> Smith. Notable Black American Women. 706.

<sup>41</sup> Numerous Contributions Listed in Appendix 1.

the African-American race to the suffragette<sup>42</sup> actions of Dr. Alice Woodby McKane later in life to help relieve political inequality.

Whatever their motives, it is a fortunate civilization that received their input.

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<sup>42</sup> Smith. Notable Black American Women. 707.

## APPENDIX 1

### ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF ALICE WOODBY MCKANE, M.D.:

Assistant U.S. Pension Medical Examiner for Civil War veterans residing in Liberia.  
Co-organizer Women's Private Hospital, Monrovia Liberia.  
Supreme Worthy Councillor of the Courts of Calanthe.  
Knights of Pythias of the Eastern and Western Hemispheres.  
St. Mary's Chapel Order of Eastern Stars.  
Scottish Rite Masons (Boston).  
Robert A. Bell Women's Relief Corps. 67, Grand Army of the Republic.  
Ladies Auxiliary to Company L, Sixth Massachusetts National Guard.  
St. Martin's Day Nursery Assoc., Boston.  
Boston Okolona Hospital Club for Okolona Miss. Institute.  
Boston Branch NAACP  
National Equal Rights League.  
League of Colored Poets of the World.  
Prominent active Republican.  
Business and Professional Women's Republican Club, Boston.  
Republican Women's Council of Massachusetts.  
Two times Womens Suffrage delegate to the Republican Massachusetts State Convention.  
Ward committeewoman and Ward representative to the Eleventh Congressional District Convention.  
Associate to Lucy Laney, Founder of the Haines Institute.  
Associate to William Heard, AME Church Bishop and the U.S. Minister to Liberia.  
In her youth Private Secretary to Fannie Jackson Coppin, Principal at Chaney Institute for Youth.  
Contributor to religious magazines and journals.  
Author of: The Fraternal Society Sick Book. 1913. Art of Healing.  
Author of: Clover Leaves. A book of poetry.



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